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ABSTRACT

In the fall semester of 1984, 66 full-time commuting university sophomores whose cumulative grade point average was between .001 and 1.99 participated in a modified replication of a diagnostic and prescriptive interview program. The program used a group session with either an agency outreach approach (N=30) or a non-outreach approach (N=36) to help students identify the causes of their poor grades and determine which campus resources would be useful to them in preventing low achievement from recurring. Students in both treatment groups persisted at significantly higher rates than students in the nontreatment control group for the semester after intervention. This trend continued, although not with statistical significance, 2 years after intervention. There were no significant differences in rates of students persisting "in good standing" although the trends were in the predicted direction and remained so for 2 years after intervention. Students left to their own initiative (non-outreach group) showed statistically greater positive effects than did students for whom the agency took the initiative (outreach group). Asking helping agencies to take an outreach approach with students who indicate an interest in being contacted by such agencies had no significant positive effect on students' academic performance, suggesting that agency outreach efforts may not be effective in inducing students in academic jeopardy to obtain help. (Author/NB)

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Diagnostic and Prescriptive Group Interviews

with Commuting Sophomores in Academic Jeopardy

Research Report # 1-88

The Counseling Center Retention Study Group*

Vivian Boyd, Steven Carstens, Patricia Hunt
Stanley Hunt, Brian McLaren, Thomas Magoon

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The Counseling Center Retention Study Group*
The University of Maryland College Park

Research Report # 1-88

Summary

In the Fall semester of 1984, 66 fulltime commuting sophomores whose cumulative grade point average was between .001 and 1.99 participated in a modified replication of a diagnostic and prescriptive interview program. By means of a group session with either an agency outreach approach (n=30) or a non-outreach approach (n=36), the purpose of this program was to help students first to identify the causes of their poor grades and then to determine which campus resources would be useful to them in preventing low achievement from recurring. Students in both treatment groups persisted at significantly higher rates than students in the nontreatment control group, for the semester after intervention. This trend was still in evidence, although not with statistical significance, two years after the intervention. There were no significant differences in rates of students persisting "in good standing" although the trends were in the predicted direction and remained so for two years after the intervention. Students left to their own initiative (non-outreach group) showed statistically greater positive effects than students for whom the agency(s) took the initiative (outreach group). Asking helping agencies to take an outreach approach with students who indicate an interest in being contacted by such agencies had no significant positive effect on students' academic performance. This finding suggests that costly agency outreach efforts may not be effective in inducing students in academic jeopardy to obtain help.

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DIAGNOSTIC AND PRESCRIPTIVE GROUP INTERVIEWS FOR COMMUTING SOPHOMORES IN ACADEMIC JEOPARDY

The Counseling Center Retention Study Group*

The University of Maryland College Park

One of the reasons cited by students who drop out of college before graduation is dissatisfaction with grades (Lenning, Beal, and Sauer, 1980). Regardless of the reasons behind the dissatisfaction with grades, it is generally agreed that once a college or university admits a student into a degree program, responsibility is placed both on the institution to provide support services that will enable the student to achieve his/her educational goals and on the student to take advantage of the resources the university has to offer. It has been observed that for students with a low grade point average, use of campus facilities is correlated with persistence, and can perhaps be seen as a measure of integration into the college community (Churchill and Iwai, 1981).

Many students in academic jeopardy fail to avail themselves of the resources at their university (Romano and Young, 1981). There is some indication that one reason for this failure is that while students know about certain campus agencies - the undergraduate advising center, the financial aid office, for example - few are aware of the existence and location of other campus resource agencies available to provide substantial help to

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students who wish to improve their academic performance (Altmaier, Rapaport, and Seeman, 1983).

In the interest of academic retention, colleges and universities are taking an increasingly proactive stance, whereby the institution takes the initiative and contacts academically at-risk students to offer them specific services (Glennon, 1976; Himelstein and Himelstein, 1977; Tata, 1981; Romano and Young, 1981; Tricomi, Donaruma, Dugan, and Cuevas, 1982; Hudesman, Avramides, Loveday, Waber, and Wendell, 1983; Letchworth and Bleidt, 1983; Landward and Hepworth, 1984; Retention Study Group, 1986, 1987).

Proactive retention interventions in which the contact with the student was made by mail and/or telephone (Tata, 1981; Letchworth and Bleidt, 1983) show no impact on GPA or on student persistence when compared with a comparable nontreatment control group. Interventions which require at-risk students to participate in a semester-long academic skills program (Himelstein and Himelstein, 1977; Landward and Hepworth, 1984) show positive effects on GPA for the semester of intervention but these effects are not durable and seem only to delay attrition.

Individual diagnostic and prescriptive interviews with at-risk freshmen (Warman, 1983; Retention Study Group, 1986) and with at-risk transfer students (Retention Study Group, 1987), show a positive effect on persistence and on academic performance for longer than the semester of intervention. However, such interventions would be quite costly in terms of professional staff time if done in individual sessions on a large scale.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the

effectiveness of a diagnostic and prescriptive information session done in group format, with groups of up to ten commuting sophomores who were in academic jeopardy (that is, had a cumulative grade point average of less than 2.0). A secondary purpose was to determine if students who asked to be contacted by specific agencies to set up an appointment time were more likely to re-enroll than students who were left to arrange such appointments on their own.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedures

The population consisted of fulltime commuting sophomores whose cumulative grade point average was between .001 and 1.99. Those students who had participated in other Counseling Center retention interventions or who had no local address and/or phone number were excluded. Fifty names were then randomly selected for the nontreatment control group. The remaining students were sent an invitational letter from the Undergraduate Dean, expressing concern regarding the student's academic performance, recommending consultation with an advisor or faculty member, and apprising the student of a possible phone call from the Counseling Center to arrange their participation in a "workshop on grades". Incentives for participation were the letter with the Dean's signature encouraging participation, and the opportunity to improve academic performance and hence chances for graduating.

There were two diagnostic and prescriptive group formats. Each began with a discussion designed to facilitate student

diagnosis of barriers to academic success. Students then completed a Problem Checklist (Warman, 1983) in which they were asked to indicate which of 22 common causes of low grades were true for them, and then to circle those causes which they considered especially troubling. With the help of a Resource Manual, prepared for the study and indexed to follow the Problem Checklist, students in both group formats identified those campus resources which appeared to offer the best help in eliminating or reducing the self-diagnosed barriers to academic success.

Students in the Outreach group (n=30) were told that the helping agency(s) appropriate to their needs would contact them if they indicated on a signup sheet their name, local address and phone number, the optimal times to be reached by phone, and the agency(s) by which they would like to be contacted. The Non-outreach group (n=36) was given no agency outreach signup sheet, and was instead encouraged to contact the appropriate help source(s) on their own.

Each student in the Outreach and Non-outreach groups was called a month after the workshop to ascertain if the diagnostic and prescriptive workshop was perceived as helpful, and to discover the nature and extent of the student's post-workshop contact with campus resource agencies.

Outcome Variables

There were two outcome variables studied to determine the effect of the intervention on subject retention rates:

(1) academic persistence, defined as registered for and completed a given semester;

(2) persistence in good standing, defined as registered for and completed a given semester and with no academic action taken as a result of that semester.

All data concerning registration status and academic action were obtained from University records. Data were analysed for four semesters subsequent to the semester of intervention.

RESULTS

Ninety percent (90%) of the Outreach group, and 83% of the Nonoutreach group reported that they found the workshop helpful. Forty-seven percent of the Outreach group reported subsequent interaction with at least one resource agency; 39% of the Nonoutreach group reported such interaction.

Table 1 shows academic persistence by group. As expected, there were no significant differences on this variable among the Outreach, Nonoutreach, and Control groups for the semester of intervention (Fall 1984). However, significant differences showed up for the semester after intervention, with students in both treatment groups persisting at higher rates than those in the control group.

Table 1.

Academic Persistence Rates by Semester by Group

	GROUP						
	Outreach		Nonoutreach		Control		
initial n	n=30		n=36		n=50		
Semester	n	%	n	%	n	%	p
Fall '84(a)	29	97	36	100	48	96	ns
Spring '85	24	80	30	83	28	56	.009
Fall '85	22	73	24	67	28	56	ns
Spring '86	17	57	23	64	26	52	ns
Fall '86	18	60	23	64	22	44	ns

(a) semester of intervention

Between the outreach group and the controls the differences were significant at $p < .05$ (chi square = 3.75); between the nonoutreach group and the control group, differences were significant at $p < .01$ (chi square = 5.93).

Table 2 shows rates of students who persisted in good standing, by group.

Table 2.

Rates of 'Persisted and in Good Standing' by Semester by Group

	Outreach		Nonoutreach		Control		
Semester	n	%	n	%	n	%	p
Fall '84(a)	11	37	18	50	13	26	.07
Spring '85	13	43	21	58	19	38	ns
Fall '85	16	53	18	50	24	48	ns
Spring '86	15	50	19	53	22	44	ns
Fall '86	15	50	16	44	18	36	ns

(a) semester of intervention

There were no statistically significant differences in the rate of those registered and in good standing between the two treatment groups and the control group, after the semester of intervention. However, the trends were in the predicted direction and remained so for two years after the intervention.

DISCUSSION

Offering diagnostic and prescriptive interviews in group format to commuting sophomores in academic jeopardy has a positive effect on their academic persistence and on their academic performance. Using the group format as opposed to the individual diagnostic and prescriptive interview format used by Warman (1983) and by The Retention Study Group (1986, 1987) did not detract from the impact of the intervention, and cut down considerably on time demands for professional staff.

The data show that asking helping agencies on campus to take an outreach approach with students who indicated an interest in being contacted by such agencies had no significant positive effect on students' academic performance. Indeed, the academic performance of students in the Non-outreach groups, as measured by the variable 'persisted and in good standing' was higher than both the Outreach group and the Control group. It would seem that students benefit more by having to take the initiative once a relevant campus agency has been identified than by being told that the relevant campus agency will contact them. This finding suggests that costly agency outreach efforts may not be effective in inducing students in academic jeopardy to obtain help.

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